

New York Post Online Edition
By: Lou Lumenick

November 21, 2003 --

21 GRAMS

Weighty drama.

Running time: 125 minutes. Rated R (violence, gore, profanity, sex). At the Empire, the Chelsea, the Lincoln Square, others.

LIKE "Mystic River," "21 Grams" is a grim, compelling and exceedingly well-acted meditation on life, death, guilt and redemption, starring a superlative Sean Penn, that seems an unmistakable response to 9/11.

Clint Eastwood's traditionalist masterwork dealt with three childhood friends haunted by a long-ago event; "21 Grams," directed by Mexico's Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, making his English-language debut, uses a radically different style to focus on three strangers brought together by a new and terrible act of fate.

Penn plays Paul, a math professor dying of coronary disease who gets a new lease on life, thanks to a heart transplant from a man (Danny Huston) who was cut down with his two young daughters in an automobile accident.

Paul's nagging sense of guilt compels him to track down and - without revealing their link - try to help the man's widow, Christina (Naomi Watts), a former party girl who has resumed her cocaine habit following the tragedy.

They become lovers and together decide to seek vengeance against Jordan (Benicio del Toro), a born-again ex-convict whose determination to stay straight with God's help was challenged when his truck accidentally plowed into Christina's family.

In less talented hands, the screenplay by "Amores Perros" writer Guillermo Arriaga might seem like a glorified soap opera - the borrowed-heart trope is especially well-worn - but with this cast and director, you won't want to miss a moment.

That's not only because it's solid adult drama, but because Inarritu has eschewed a straight-line narrative in favor of a challenging, non-linear structure that sketches the basic story in the first few minutes, then keeps going back and forth to fill in more and more key details.

Penn, del Toro and Watts create some of the year's richest, most wrenching characters, ably supported by Charlotte Gainsborough as Penn's estranged wife and Melissa Leo as del Toro's stricken spouse.

Stunningly photographed, largely with a hand-held camera, by Rodrigo Prieto (another member of the "Amores Perros" team) on gritty locations in Memphis and Albuquerque, "21 Grams" is also a visual tour de force - and a rare Hollywood product depicting class differences with any kind of honesty.

The title refers to the weight - perhaps the soul - the body is said to lose at the precise moment of death.

But "21 Grams" has no shortage of soul, wit or intelligence. It's terrific.